

Session 1 - Historical Supplement

African history for the last 500 years has been shaped by the confrontation with European technology and the system of values which go along with it. Before that, there were thousands of years, during which african societies developed coherent social order, religion and the arts, and environmentally stable economies.

We can't pretend that Africa was a paradise. They contended with flood and drouth. They had wars and indigenous slavery. Their economies were mainly at a subsistence level.

The European encroachments in West and South Africa, beginning in the 15th century radically disturbed the relative equilibrium of the societies they touched -- first at points along the coast, and later across the continent as traders, explorers and missionaries penetrated the interior.

Economic exploitation: Gold, leather, coral, pepper in the 15th-16th centuries, slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. Africa served the European economies. (In the 20th centuries it was iron, diamonds and oil.)

Political exploitation: In the 19th century, Africa was an arena for political confrontation between european powers: France vs. England in West Africa. Germany playing England against France. England vs. Germany in East Africa. Portugal as a minor player, and Belgium bulding a commercial empire in Central Africa. (Stanley as agent for Leopold I) The political issues were far more important than any economic benefits for Europe, but they led to the scramble for colonies, culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1891, where Africa was carved up, often without regard to traditional ethnic boundaries. (African space.)

We saw a variety of that during the "cold war" years of the 1950's and 60's. U.S.A.I.D. and the Peace Corps were there as a means of countering Soviet and Chinese Communism. At the governmental level, the purposes were geo-political, more than either benevolent or economic.

In short, except for very brief periods -- gold (until Central America was opened), Spices,(Until India and Indonesia were opened), Slaves (Until they became economically unprofitable and socially unacceptable), and oil (for however long we don't know), Africa has had